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SUBJECT: NEW MAYOR OUTLINES PRIORITIES, AMONG THEM TIP

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The fight against trafficking in persons "ought to be a priority," new Nicosia Mayor Eleni Mavrou told the Ambassador January 26. Revealing the municipality had not yet finalized its strategic plans, Mavrou promised her team would search out areas where it could take action on TIP. Turning to other initiatives, she hoped to revitalize the Old City by eliminating red-tape that hurt business, penalizing absentee landlords whose properties lacked upkeep, and luring former residents back home. Dedicated to bi-communal interaction, Mavrou already had engaged her Turkish Cypriot counterpart and pledged intent to identify additional areas of cooperation. She lamented the slow pace of UN-brokered negotiations on the Cyprus Problem, however, believing a grand gesture -- such as opening the checkpoint at Ledra Street, the historic center of Nicosia -- was in order. Improved party-to-party contacts might also bring the communities closer, and Mavrou claimed positive atmospherics surrounded the recent meeting between her AKEL and the ideologically similar Turkish Cypriot CTP. END SUMMARY.

A Full Plate Awaits

¶2. (SBU) Mavrou won the mayorship in December in a bloody four-candidate race. A former AKEL MP, she is perhaps the RoC's most prominent "Yes" voter, referring to the failed 2004 referendum that sought to reunify the island. Despite a current political environment that favors hard-liners, she maintained a pro-solution slant in the election run-up, despite it costing her votes. To offer congratulations and the Embassy's hopes for a close relationship with the municipality, the Ambassador January 26 called on the engaging mayor.

¶3. (U) Experience as a municipal councilor ten years earlier had made her learning curve less steep, Mavrou asserted. Yet a desk as cluttered as any political officer's betrayed hopes of afternoons off. The city's needs were many, she explained: better roads, cleaner streets, and economic growth. Certain problems were shared with the dozen municipalities comprising greater Nicosia; a high priority involved improving coordination with her fellow mayors and lobbying the central government with a common voice. Other maladies were her city's alone, however. Old Nicosia, for example, while benefiting greatly from the partially USG-funded Master Plan, still suffered economic hardship. Wealthy residents had left for the suburbs and in their place had arrived third-world immigrants, heavy consumers of municipal services.

¶4. (U) One only had to walk Nicosia's streets to realize Cyprus suffered a TIP problem, Mavrou admitted after the Ambassador had raised the subject. A former MP whose committee had prepared a well-received report on trafficking,

she had interacted with Embassy personnel and knew first-hand our interest in combating the problem on the island. "This ought to be a city priority," Mavrou exclaimed. City leaders, consumed with preparing strategic plans, had not focused on TIP, but Mavrou pledged to seek out areas where the municipality might take action. (Note: Like other jurisdictions, the City of Nicosia regulates licensing for businesses operating within city limits and could act to sanction and/or shut "cabarets" for various violations. End Note.)

¶5. (U) Growth in greater Nicosia favored the suburbs, Mavrou allowed; she hoped to reverse the trend. As long as the city remained divided, however, hope for development at the city's northern extreme looked scant. Further south possibilities seemed better, but Old Nicosia continued to suffer from scores of vacant, decaying properties. The municipality was considering tax breaks for developers and subsidies to attract new residents. Additionally, municipal leaders were considering imposing tax or other penalties on landlords who failed to maintain their buildings or left them vacant.

Ledra a Key to Development

¶6. (U) Historic heart of the old city and of Nicosia proper, Ledra Street has been blocked for traffic since inter-communal violence broke out in 1963. "Far more than the other checkpoints, Ledra represents a tie between our communities, and opening it to pedestrian traffic would prove tremendously symbolic as well as a boon to local merchants," Mavrou asserted. By meeting a Greek Cypriot demand and ordering an offending footbridge demolished, Turkish leader Mehmet Ali Talat had taken a welcome first step. The continued presence of Turkish Forces patrols near the

NICOSIA 00000080 002 OF 002

northern edge of the buffer zone remained problematic, she worried. That said, were both sides to gather the requisite political will, she thought a compromise was within reach, following the precedents and policies established when Cyprus's other checkpoints opened.

¶7. (U) Already, the new mayor had reached out to Turkish Cypriot counterpart Mayor Cem Bulutogullari, appearing with him on a mid-January Turkish Cypriot television program. They had jointly engaged the UNDP to discuss the Nicosia Master Plan, a USAID-funded program tapped with restoring historically/culturally significant areas of Old Nicosia. Day-to-day issues like electricity and sewers too looked ripe for inter-municipality cooperation, Mavrou ventured; she had tasked her city councilors with engaging their Turkish Cypriot counterparts. European Union monies were available for restoring or demolishing structures in the buffer zone, and she hoped Bulutogullari and she might demarche the EU jointly. "Semantics" could prove problematic with the Greek Cypriot hard-liners and a hindrance to inter-communal cooperation, however, should the Turkish side insist on using titles, waving the "TRNC" flag, and the like.

Talks on the CyProb: Slow Going

¶8. (SBU) The Ambassador opined that, although all sides should be pressed to produce progress toward reunification, the election calendar in the region worked against major movement on the Cyprus Problem in 2007. Regardless, both sides needed to "prepare the ground" for what looked like better prospects for 2008 through an immediate kick-off of work in the UN's so-called "technical committees" process. Mavrou agreed it was time that community negotiators get to work. "Seven months have passed since (UN Political Under Secretary Ibrahim) Gambari's visit," she figured, "and the

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people want a solution." While the municipality had only

limited abilities to affect movement, a "grand gesture," like Ledra Street's opening, could act as a catalyst. Commenting upon the current environment in the government-controlled areas, which is far from pro-solution, Mavrou claimed that, since the 1974 conflict, public opinion regarding inter-communal contacts had been cyclical and better times might arrive soon. It was vital to expand such contacts, she thought, targeting rank-and-file from both communities and not just elites. Focusing on practical issues of genuine concert to both communities would yield better public response than efforts focused on the theoretical need for bi-communal rapprochement.

¶9. (U) Mavrou voiced optimism over improved party-to-party contacts. Her own AKEL had just concluded a fruitful meeting with the Turkish Cypriot CTP, Talat's party. She hoped a follow-up gathering would occur shortly, bringing an end to the CTP-AKEL cooling-off period that had followed the failed 2004 referendum.

Comment:

¶10. (SBU) Eleni Mavrou won the top slot in our recent list of Cyprus's most influential women, attesting to her intelligence, track record, and electability. From her perch at the mayorship, we hope she proves a willing and able interlocutor on the CyProb and issues that affect both communities, like TIP. Her fervent support of the 2004 Annan Plan makes her damaged goods to some, however, and Benedict Arnold to others. To build the relationships she will need to govern effectively, she likely will feel pressure to adopt more "centrist" positions, which in the current environment mean harder-line stances. So far, positively, she seems to be maintaining her pro-solution stripes. End Comment.

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